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RESULTS OF COMMISSION GOVERNMENT IN HUNTINGTON, WEST VIRGINIA

BY GEORGE I. NEAL,
Attorney-at-Law, Huntington, W. Va.

Commission government in Huntington has been on trial two years. Prior to the advent of the present order of things, we were governed by a large body of elective councilmen, who transacted public business through committees of their own body. The long ballot was then in vogue, and many of the city offices were filled by election by the people. In general, it was the same kind of government then and now in operation in most of the cities of this country.

Huntington now has a bi-partisan charter, thereby a non-partisan government. The only elective officers, excepting the referendum board, are four commissioners—at present two democrats and two republicans. The commissioner receiving the largest vote is designated the mayor of the city, and, as such, he designates himself and each of the other commissioners to be at the head of one of the four departments of city government. Not more than two of the commissioners can belong to the same political party, thereby preventing the public business and public offices becoming the asset of any political party. All other officers are appointed by the commissioners. In theory, their appointment is independent of politics, political parties, political bosses or captains of industry. In practice, they are about equally divided between the democratic and republican parties. But all are impressed with the idea that duties well performed is the safest guarantee for their continuance in office. Not having secured their appointments from any one political party, they hold, in local affairs at least, no hard allegiance to any party. The police and fire departments—the political spoils department of every city—are under civil service, and officers and men employed therein can be removed only for cause.

Whilst great power is placed in the commissioners, yet the charter requires that the most important of those powers be exercised through ordinances, which are subject to the veto of the citi-

zens' board. This board is purposely made of large membership so that it may remain beyond the probability of being corrupted. As its members have no onerous duties to perform there will be no reason why the best citizens should refuse to be elected to the board. It is not intended that the citizens' board shall meet often. It is to meet only when necessary to check the wrongful action of the commissioners in the passage of harmful ordinances and franchises. The board will operate as a reserve brake, to be used only when the emergency may arise. It is in the nature of a referendum board, but it does not act affirmatively. Ordinances and franchises become effective unless vetoed by the citizens' board. In other words, the scheme works automatically, and no action of the citizens' board is required to make an ordinance or franchise effective.

Our old form of government was cumbersome, ineffective, haphazard and extravagant. Official acts, whether right or wrong, could not be checked by any charter provision. Political parties—first one and then the other—had full sway and were administered along the lines “to the victors belong the spoils.” Under such conditions it was only natural that corruption in elections and extravagance in administering public affairs should be conspicuous results.

The change has been marked, the results have been good. Reformation, or the change in conducting public affairs, has not been brought about by any “reform party” or set of people holding themselves out as “reformers.” Our charter was not considered and drawn by those versed in theory only; but by politicians, business and professional men, laborers, and commercial and other business organizations; by those who knew and practiced the game of politics, and those who were the victims of a system to exploit the public business of a growing and prosperous city for the (temporary) advancement of a political party. Thus conceived and given birth, our charter has stood the test of every day conditions of practical things, whims and fancies.

Results, more in detail, are: First and foremost, stands out the reform in elections. Formerly an election in Huntington meant corruption, strife, and bitterness. Police officers and firemen encouraged crimes against the ballot and shielded the perpetrators thereof. The ballots of good men and property owners were coun-

teracted by the votes of migratory tramps and toughs under the protection of city officials. Some of these same officials are now holding like positions under the new order of things, and now, under civil service, they uphold law and order, and perform their duties with fidelity, and to the satisfaction of the general public. Personal and political obligations having been removed by charter provision, these same men have become the faithful servants of the people. Since the coming of commission government, elections in Huntington, whether local or state, have been invariably clean and without the old-time bitterness.

The financial condition of the city has improved, and municipal finances are handled in a systematic and business-like way. Under the old regime, the city had contracted a floating indebtedness of considerable size, and city warrants, drawing interest, were afloat and unpaid. The management of municipal finances was in doubt and always under suspicion and criticism. Now, the finances of the city are in a healthy condition; warrants are paid in cash upon presentation; and the management along those lines has the confidence of the people. The old indebtedness has been wiped out, and now the annual income equals annual expenditures. Salaries are fairly liberal, but not extravagant. The tax rate is about the same as formerly. It has never been, and is not now, the policy of our city to administer public affairs stingily. The test is, a dollar's worth for every dollar expended; and we have measured up to that test. More miles of streets and alleys have been paved, more miles of sewers have been constructed, more street lights, and water hydrants have been added than ever before in a like period. The police and fire departments have been about doubled, and the old apparatus for fire-fighting is being displaced by modern and up-to-date equipment. The first, and a modern, market house is being constructed, and a new building for a central fire department, jail, and police court rooms has been provided for; a large plat of ground, centrally located, has been secured, on which to build a city hall and auditorium of large seating capacity. The demands for public improvements have been many. That is only natural in a growing, prosperous city, standing almost at the top of the list of cities in the United States recording the greatest gain in population since 1900, its percentage of gain being 162. A large acreage has been procured for park purposes, and preparation is being made for the laying

out of a beautiful park. Many other items of public improvements might be mentioned; but their enumeration is not necessary to convince a reasonable mind that commission government has to its credit the doing of much of the public improvements of the city.

Last, but not by any means least, the general tone of administering municipal affairs has been raised. Politics having been banished from influence and power, the saloon has retired from active participation in municipal politics. The bums, tramps, and other human outcasts are without power. As their influence has waned that of the better citizens has increased. The people are taking more interest in public questions. Duties have been centered in some one person, responsibility is fixed and certain. Here in Huntington now there are truly no knockers; every one is a booster. The new charter, and the accomplishments thereunder, are pointed to with pride and satisfaction. The wonderful growth of our city, and the intense public spirit of our people, may, and does, account for much of the change, but certain it is that we owe much, in the general result, to commission government. Our people are so well pleased with the new order that, were our charter to stand the test of a vote of the people, it would be sustained, in my opinion, by practically a unanimous vote. I assert, with confidence in my statement, that commission government in Huntington has stood the test and has come to stay.